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RUEHZS/ASEAN REGIONAL FORUM COLLECTIVE

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SUBJECT: SOME PROGRESS FOR QUANG NINH PROTESTANTS

REF: A) 05 HANOI 2838, B) HANOI 1466

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¶1. (SBU) On June 16, Poloff met Quang Ninh Province religious affairs officials and visited a Ha Long City Protestant house church. Poloff was allowed to participate in a frank dialogue between provincial officials and congregants at the church concerning the group's one year delayed registration under the GVN's new framework on religion. Officials noted that the province will not let Protestants register soon, but will allow them to gather for worship in small groups for the time being. Nevertheless, the unprecedented access to the Protestant's place of worship we were afforded and the fact that we were allowed to observe the dialogue are positive developments and run counter to our expectations of this normally recalcitrant province. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) On June 16, Poloff and Pol Assistants traveled to Quang Ninh Province and met with Mr. Nguyen Tran Truong, Deputy Director of the provincial Department of Religion and Ethnicity (DRE). There were no police or Ministry of Public Security (MPS) participants in the meeting. Poloff stressed the importance of expanding religious freedom for U.S.-Vietnam bilateral relations and inquired about the DRE's efforts to fulfill the PM's instructions on Protestant registration, noting that the GVN's Committee on Religious Affairs (CRA) recently informed the Embassy that each province in the North is developing its own plan to implement the registration policy (REF B). Poloff expressed concern that despite longstanding applications, three Evangelical Church of Vietnam North (ECVN) congregations (one in Ha Long City and two in Mong Cai District) have not yet been allowed to register (REF A).

Protestant Registration Will Not Occur This Summer.

¶3. (SBU) Nguyen provided the standard historical overview that Protestantism has only existed in Quang Ninh Province since 1990, and that many Protestants are confused about their actual church affiliation. Some congregations have multiple denominations or frequently change their allegiances. Despite this, "provincial authorities are strictly implementing the PM's instructions and have established a roadmap to fulfill GVN policy on religion." This includes conducting seminars for district and commune officials responsible for "educating" Protestants about their legal obligation under registration laws. Regarding the three unregistered congregations, Nguyen maintained that his department has initiated a long-term process to register the groups, but noted that "the congregations need to understand their activities and establish themselves according to the law" before they will be allowed to register. For the time being, local commune officials will "continue to provide the necessary guidance," and members will be allowed to continue to meet privately in small groups, he said.

¶4. (SBU) Poloff noted that Vietnam's accession to the WTO and the

opening up of Vietnamese society will likely introduce more Protestant denominations in the province. It is to the province's advantage if Quang Ninh officials register the three ECVN congregations before the number of applications increases. If local officials use this opportunity to establish a coherent framework for the registration process, the province will ensure a stable expansion of religious freedoms in Vietnam, which is a core interest of the United States. Nguyen promised to convey this message to the provincial leadership.

Officials Are Open To Dialogue With Congregations.

15. (SBU) Nguyen attributed tensions between provincial officials and Protestant groups to a "failure to communicate" and complained that congregations do not report their meetings to authorities. Provincial officials have sought out Protestant groups with a sincere desire to discuss conditions for registering their activities. Nguyen requested the Embassy team dispel Protestants' fears about the local administration and expressed a desire to establish a dialogue with congregations. Poloff observed that Protestants' anxiety and frustrations with local officials are legitimate and stem from negative experiences dealing with the DRE in the past, but welcomed Nguyen's efforts to reach out to them.

The Province Still Needs More Priests.

16. (SBU) Turning to Catholic issues, Nguyen acknowledged that the number of priests in the Catholic parish remains inadequate. Out of the 57 new priests recently ordained in Vietnam, only one was assigned to the province. Nguyen assured Poloff that he plans to support any applications for priesthood to the Hanoi seminary from his jurisdiction. (Note: when Ambassador Marine visited Quang Ninh Province last October, there were only five priests assigned to the parish, although the church estimates that it needs at least twice this number to serve the needs of parishioners. End Note.)

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Quang Ninh Allows Embassy Team To Visit House Church.

17. (SBU) In the afternoon, Poloff visited the ECVN-affiliated Ha Long Congregation and met with members of its executive board. Nguyen and Mrs. Kim (NFI), the DRE's Expert on Protestant Affairs, also accompanied the Embassy team. Mr. Tan Truong Sy, Chairman of the congregation's executive board, greeted Poloff in a busy Ha Long City neighborhood and led the party to the group's place of worship, which is located in a small triangular space above a grocery store. This sparsely furnished room fronts the third floor of the building which sits in the middle of the block and has picture windows facing the street. As we arrived, a meeting was in session and hymns were clearly audible from the sidewalk. There was no visible police presence observing the storefront or the group's activities inside the church. About fifteen congregants were present for the meeting, most over the age of forty. Roughly two-thirds of those assembled were women. The congregants cheerfully welcomed the Embassy team and some wept for joy at the occasion throughout the ensuing discussion.

18. (SBU) Tan gave a short introduction and summarized the hurdles the congregation has faced since first applying for registration over a year ago (REF A). He noted that after seeking the guidance of provincial officials the congregation resubmitted a new application on April 24 following DRE-stated guidelines. To date, the group has still not received any official response and local (ward) authorities have ignored all inquiries. The executive board is discouraged and has now adopted a wait-and-see attitude, Tan said.

19. (SBU) Poloff observed that this meeting was a good opportunity to build trust between the congregation and provincial officials, and noted that while the executive board has not always responded to the DRE's meeting requests (which has frustrated officials), dealing with local authorities is understandably intimidating for members of

the congregation. Nevertheless, the relationship between congregation members and local officials appears to be moving in the right direction. Poloff also emphasized the significance of Nguyen and Kim's presence. Poloff encouraged members of the executive board to share their concerns directly with DRE officials, and invited Nguyen and Kim to clarify DRE policies on registration procedures and explain why it has not responded to the congregation's application within 60 days as required by law.

Congregation Members Express Their Grievances.

¶10. (SBU) One member of the executive board (NFI) rose and, after a ten-minute preamble in which he expressed the fervent desire that "God will love Mr. Nguyen and Ms. Kim and the other officials in Quang Ninh province and open their hearts to salvation," voiced his frustration about the registration process and stated that "local members feel helpless and do not know what else to do." "In the interest of Christian truth," the man also complained about an altercation between members of the church and authorities which had occurred when a small prayer group had convened the previous Saturday. He stated that local police officers interrupted the prayers and ordered all members of the church to leave, claiming that any such activities are illegal before the congregation's registration is complete. Despite this setback, the man stated that he still hoped for peaceful relations between church members and local officials and he offered a prayer for them.

¶11. (SBU) Another male member of the church rose and also complained about the length of time it has taken to receive any response to the group's registration application and lamented continued harassments from local police who routinely label Protestantism an "illegal American religion" and spread other distorting rumors about churchgoers' practices including that they worship drunk and in the nude. By this point, the congregation, which had seemed timid and cautious at the beginning of the discussion, had become more brazen in showing its discontent. Emboldened by his co-religionists' support, the man began to make increasingly provocative statements, e.g. "we call on God and America and the international community to force the Communist party to change." Poloff interrupted the man before the discussion got too subversive, and invited the DRE officials to reply.

DRE officials tell their side of the story.

¶12. (SBU) Kim rose confidently to address the congregants' criticisms and responded that the application the congregation had submitted a year ago "was not in good form" and did not meet legal requirements. She also added in an officious tone that "according to the Ordinance on Religion," the congregation needs to establish themselves for a year at the "grass-roots level" before the

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provincial DRE can consider their formal registration request. "This is the procedure laid out in the law." Her statement immediately provoked an uproar among the members of the executive board. Poloff noted that the ordinance does not lay out procedures as she described and attempted to mitigate the tension in the room by noting that each province has developed its own policies to implement the Ordinance on Religion. He encouraged members of the congregation to cooperate more closely with provincial officials, in order to convince them to speed up their implementing plan.

¶13. (SBU) Nguyen intervened and suggested that Kim (who showed extreme embarrassment at her loss of face) had only stated her personal opinion about the law's language on the registration process. He reiterated his wish to maintain "peaceful relations" with church members, because the DRE respects "some of the activities of the congregation." Since the GVN respects religious freedom, the state will never intervene when followers conduct their activities at home, but public gathering without proper authorization is illegal. Even so, if the local police act inappropriately, "local authorities will correct the situation and not leave it unresolved," Nguyen stated

¶14. (SBU) Nguyen further noted that Protestantism is a new religion in Quang Ninh Province; therefore, processing the congregation's application will take time, because "not many local bureaucrats are believers or even understand the religion." He compared the development of Protestantism to the development of the Cao Dai sect, which appeared in 1926 in Vietnam but was only recognized in 1999. Nguyen also maintained that after receiving the congregation's second application, the DRE promptly reported the issue to the provincial leadership, which advised congregation members to organize as smaller groups for the time being. According to the provincial plan, Protestants should initially register their activities at the grass-roots level, before the DRE can facilitate the formal registration application. Nguyen concluded by saying that the disagreement arising from lack of resolution of the congregation's application has also bothered the DRE because congregation members do not seek out the DRE to discuss the implementation of provincial guidelines.

¶15. (SBU) Poloff commended the dialogue between members of the executive board and the DRE officials, and reiterated that both sides' frustrations are legitimate so more discussions are necessary to develop mutual understanding and trust. Nguyen seconded Poloff's statement and said: "I have learned something new at this meeting." He promised to report the congregation's frustrations to higher-level provincial officials and to work out a solution to accelerate the registration process. Another member of the executive board attempted to question Poloff about the USG assessment of the condition of human rights in Vietnam and illustrated his own assessment with another instance of harassment during a Christmas celebration in December 2005. Tan concluded the discussion by noting that the congregation is now optimistic that local officials take their plight seriously and he asked congregation members not to blame provincial officials for all their ills. He urged members of the church to always report ward level police harassment to provincial authorities, so that the DRE and the Provincial People's Committee can investigate and resolve these incidents as Nguyen suggested.

Comment

¶16. (SBU) Although the conditions for the Ha Long City Protestant congregation are much improved since the security-plagued visit last October during which the PPC attempted to prevent the executive board of the Ha Long congregation from meeting with the Ambassador, it is clear that the Quang Ninh provincial government will not register any Protestant congregations for the time being. Despite Nguyen's assurances of good faith, the provincial strategy to implement the PM's Instruction on Protestantism only at the grass-roots level appears to be a stalling tactic as the province resolves its suspicions about the "new religion." Nevertheless, unprecedented Embassy access to the Protestants' place of worship and the fact that we were allowed to observe the dialogue between the congregation and DRE officials are strikingly positive developments. Since our visit, the congregation has confirmed that there have not been any repercussions from or police harassment concerning the meeting.

MARINE